

# The Real Causes of America's Wars, Lecture 1

The War Between the States

# Does the Name Matter?

- Why did I call the war the War Between the States rather than the Civil War?
- This isn't a matter of adopting the name Southern partisans prefer.
- A civil war is a war to take over the government of a country, as in the English Civil War or Spanish Civil War. The American "Civil War" wasn't like that. The Southern states wanted to form an independent confederacy. They weren't proposing to take over the U.S. government.

# Effects of the War

- The War resulted in over 600,000 military deaths and an unknown number of civilian deaths; except for WWII, this was the most of any American war.
- It was the bloodiest war of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Before the War, the Southern per capita income was about 80% of the the Northern per capita income. After the war, it was only 40% and it took about 100 years after 1865 for the 80% level to be reached.

# Was the War Needed to End Slavery?

- Given the immense costs of the war, the question naturally arises: could it have been avoided?
- Was the War needed to end slavery? The British in the 1830s ended slavery in the West Indies by buying off the planters. Doing this with the Southern slave owners would have been less costly than the War, according to the Harvard economist Robert Barro.
- Slavery was abolished peacefully in other countries in 19<sup>th</sup> century, e.g., Brazil and the

# Verdicts on the War

- Barro says that Lincoln presided over the biggest error in American history.
- Lord Acton, the great British classical liberal historian, in a letter to Robert E. Lee in November 1866 said: “Without presuming to decide the purely legal question, on which it seems evident to me from Madison's and Hamilton's papers that the Fathers of the Constitution were not agreed, I saw in State Rights the only availing check upon the absolutism of the sovereign will, and

# Acton Quotation Continued

- The institutions of your Republic have not exercised on the old world the salutary and liberating influence which ought to have belonged to them, by reason of those defects and abuses of principle which the Confederate Constitution was expressly and wisely calculated to remedy. I believed that the example of that great Reform would have blessed all the races of mankind by establishing true freedom purged of the native dangers and disorders of Republics.

# Acton Quotation Concluded

- Therefore I deemed that you were fighting the battles of our liberty, our progress, and our civilization; and I mourn for the stake which was lost at Richmond more deeply than I rejoice over that which was saved at Waterloo.”

# Two Views of the United States

- We tend to think today of the US as a single country, like France or Spain.
- This wasn't the dominant view in the pre-1865 period. "United States" is a plural expression—people would refer to "these United States". The flag was rarely displayed except on ships.
- A state didn't mean an administrative division of a country. "State" was a synonym for "independent government."



# Two Views Continued

- The states, under the Articles of Confederation, were sovereign. They retained sovereignty, except for powers delegated to the central government, in new government set up under the Constitution.
- Jefferson and Madison claimed in the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions in 1798 that states could nullify laws they thought were unconstitutional.

# Even More on the Two Views

- Some people, such as Jefferson, went further. They thought that a state could withdraw (secede) from the Union. This isn't implied by nullification. Accepting secession doesn't imply accepting nullification, either; but the two views usually went together.
- States rights was especially emphasized in the South. The Southern states were anxious to ensure that their social system, including slavery, was kept intact.

# Two Views Concluded

- There was a contrasting position, more popular in the North than the South. This held that the United States was much more like an ordinary nation than the Jeffersonians believed.
- Supporters of this view included Alexander Hamilton, Joseph Story, and, most of the time, Daniel Webster. They said that once the states ratified the Constitution, they couldn't change their mind about being in the Union without consent of the other states.

# Different Economic Interests

- The South depended primarily on agriculture. It had to purchase industrial products, so it favored free trade. This would enable it to get these goods at cheaper prices.
- Also, American tariffs would increase the chances that other countries would retaliate. This would put Southern exports in danger. The Southern economy depended on revenue from exports, especially of cotton.

# Different Economic Interests

## Continued

- Many in the Northern States favored protective tariffs to promote American industry. The Southern states resented this. They would have to pay for more expensive Northern products.
- The American System, favored by Henry Clay, was especially important in promoting tariffs. The main points of the System were high tariffs, a national bank, and internal improvements. The Whig Party supported this and the Jacksonians opposed it. Clay was

# Conflict Over the Tariff

- In 1832, South Carolina nullified the tariffs of 1828 and 1832. The nullificationists said these tariffs were too high.
- As we'll see, South Carolina was always in the forefront of movements opposing the federal government.
- Andrew Jackson, although in the Jeffersonian tradition, rejected nullification. Congress passed the Force Bill authorizing use of military force to collect the tariff. South Carolina nullified this also. When Congress

# Conflict Over Slavery

- Slavery had been abolished in states north of the Mason-Dixon line (the boundary between Pennsylvania and Delaware, on the one hand, and Maryland and Virginia + West Virginia, on the other) by 1804.
- In the Southern states, slavery became more entrenched after the invention of the cotton gin.
- The rise of the abolitionist movement in the North added to the tension.

# Slavery in the Territories

- Except for the abolitionists, the North didn't favor the total suppression of slavery. Most people in the North wanted to exclude slavery from new territories that the US acquired.
- A main reason for this was that people wanted to exclude blacks altogether. The aim was to help free white labor.



# Missouri Compromise

- The conflict over slavery led to the passage of a bill in 1820 that prohibited slavery in the former Louisiana territory north of a certain line, except for Missouri.
- Maine was admitted as a free state, and Missouri as a slave state.

# The Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850

- Conflict over extension of slavery in the territories got worse after efforts to pass the Wilmot Proviso, in 1846. This would have forbidden slavery in any territory acquired in the Mexican War.
- The Compromise of 1850 somewhat relieved the crisis. It allowed the admission of California as a free state but made provision for possible slave states in Utah and New Mexico. The Compromise also included a

# Secession in 1850

- There were secessionists in 1850 and 1851, such as Robert Barnwell Rhett in South Carolina, William Yancey in Alabama, and Edmund Ruffin in Virginia.
- The efforts of these “fire eaters” were defeated.
- Secession in 1851 would probably have had a better chance of success than in 1861, because the disparity in economic growth between North and South wasn't as great.

# Kansas-Nebraska Act

- The Kansas-Nebraska Act, (1854) sponsored by Stephen A. Douglas, allowed people in the Kansas and Nebraska territories to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. This repealed the Missouri Compromise.
- The Act led to armed conflict between pro and anti-slavery factions in Kansas

# The Dred Scott Decision

- In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled that Negroes, even if free, could never be US citizens .
- It also ruled the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional. Congress had no power to prohibit slave owners from bringing their slaves into federal territories.

# The Election of 1860

- The Republican party had been formed in 1856 as an anti-slavery party. It nominated Abraham Lincoln for president at its 1860 Convention. He was a prominent railroad lawyer.
- The Democratic Party split.
- Lincoln was elected in a 4-way race, although he wasn't even on the ballot in much of the South.

# Lincoln's Policy

- Lincoln was not an abolitionist. He thought that he had no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the states. He even favored the Corwin Amendment, which would have entrenched slavery permanently.
- Lincoln opposed slavery in the territories. Although he opposed all slavery, he didn't believe that blacks should have political rights in the US. He favored settling them in colonies.
- Most important, he favored Clay's American

# Why Secession?

- After Lincoln's election, but before his inauguration in March 1861, 7 states, led by South Carolina, seceded from the Union.
- If Lincoln didn't want to end slavery in the states, why did they do it?
- They feared that Republicans more radical than Lincoln, like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, proposed to overthrow their institutions.
- They also opposed the North's high tariff policy. They feared that the low tariff of 1857



# Fort Sumter

- The War began when Lincoln tried to reinforce the garrison at Fort Sumter, which commanded the Charleston harbor. Lincoln knew this would probably provoke an attack.
- After the Fort surrendered, Lincoln called for a national army to suppress the rebellion. 4 more states seceded.

# The War and Slavery

- The War wasn't fought to end slavery.
- Lincoln was a strong nationalist. He said that if freeing all the slaves would help him win the war, he would do that; if freeing none of them would, he would free none of them.
- The Emancipation Proclamation, September 1862, helped turn the war into an ideological conflict.
- Lincoln favored total war, abandoning the restraints on war that had been taught at West Point.

# Popular View of the War

- The most popular opinion about the War today is that it was a struggle between Good and Evil. The North fought to end slavery and the South to preserve and extend it.
- This view of the war as a holy crusade was prominent during the War itself.
- After the War and the end of Reconstruction, this interpretation tended to fade out. There was a mood of national reconciliation.

# Changes in Interpretation

- For example, Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*, says that both sides were acting on what they thought was right.
- Before WWII, the dominant view was that both sides had made mistakes. The War could have been avoided had it not been for extremists on both sides. Stephen A. Douglas, who debated Lincoln, went up in popular estimation

# The Pre-WWII Consensus

- Douglas was viewed as someone who wanted to compromise and avert war.
- Historians such as J.G. Randall and Avery Craven said that the war had come about by a series of mistakes. There was no “irrepressible conflict.” (This was a phrase used by Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William Henry Seward in 1858 )

# After WWII

- After WWII, historians tended to shift to the moral struggle position. The War was a conflict between good and evil.
- Why did this change occur? WWII was seen as a struggle against evil. Influential historians such as Kenneth Stampp and political theorists such as Harry Jaffa were affected by this when considering the War Between the States.

# Civil Rights Movement

- After WWII and especially in the 1950s and 60s, the civil rights movement flourished.
- The War was considered a precursor to the civil rights movement and the struggle to end slavery was emphasized.
- The role of the Communist Party in promoting the good against evil interpretation was important. Marx viewed the War as an assault by the Slave Power, and Communist-influenced historians have continued this opinion to the present day.